



only the road

EIGHT DECADES OF CUBAN POETRY

solo el camino

edited and translated by

MARGARET RANDALL

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FOR THE POETS OF CUBA,
wherever in the world they live.

AND FOR
Bladimir Zamora, 1952–2016

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INTRODUCTION

What you have before you is an anthology of Cuban poetry from the past eight decades. The oldest poets were born in 1902 and are still known for poems written in the 1930s. The youngest was born in 1981 and is now at a high point of creativity. There are fifty-six in all, with one long or several shorter poems each.

All translations are mine. Translation is a complex endeavor, and poetry translation, in particular, is often a balancing act between attending to the integrity of the original and producing something that is artistically effective. A version that is too literal fails to become a poem; one that goes too far in the other direction may be a poem but at some point ceases to be a translation. Great poetry has often been destroyed by poor translation and mediocre poetry falsely enhanced by translation that “improves” it.

As a poet myself, I had to resist the temptation to impose my voice on others. But because I am a poet, because I know or knew many of these authors personally and have followed their work over many years, and because I lived in Cuba for more than a decade, becoming familiar with that nation’s unique take on the Spanish language, I knew I could do the work justice. When it came to some of the more traditional forms or internal rhyme schemes, I paid more attention to style and rhythm than to trying to render that which in one language cannot be fully duplicated in another that plays by such different rules. In every instance I have prioritized the poet’s voice while retaining his or her texture and meaning.

I chose work I feel is representative of each poet but also of Cuba’s poetic history and culture, in periods preceding and following the Revolution, times both exhilarating and difficult. These poets are women and men, black and white and every shade in between, of several sexual identities, from every cor-

ner of the island and from a diaspora that has claimed so many Cuban voices. The book's title comes from a line in one of Cleve Solís's poems, "Caminos." The poem's title speaks of roads, while the text itself ends with a single road. To me, *Only the Road* evokes the Cuban journey, outside the country as well as on the island.

All anthologies are products of the anthologizer's taste. My principal criterion was poetic excellence. Many fine poets are missing, but I believe my selection is representative. For each poet I have included biographical notes that go beyond the usual list of books published and prizes won to offer a parallel narrative of poetry in Cuba. To those who accuse me of a bit of extra-literary focus in these notes, I plead guilty. I have wanted to showcase these poets' lives, concerns, and attitudes, what inspired them or that which they rebelled against, and the important connections among them. My aim has been to bring the reader as close as possible to Cuba's creative world. There is a separate section of bibliographic information.

I want, for a moment, to address gender. In 1967, when the bilingual journal that Sergio Mondragón and I edited out of Mexico City devoted an entire issue to Cuba, only four of the twenty-seven poets included were women.¹ Ten years later, I prepared an anthology for the *Colorado State Review*. Of the fifteen poets in that selection, there were two women.² When challenged, I resorted to the excuse so prevalent back then (and still): "I looked but couldn't find more." Of course I hadn't really looked; I didn't know how. Four years later, I redeemed myself with *Breaking the Silences*, a collection of twenty-five Cuban women poets, translated, annotated, and with an introduction that made clear the importance of the female voice in the island's poetic panorama.³ At the time, this poor representation was not unusual. Nor was the fact that finally showcasing women's work required a separate book. Separate but equal! And the bias continues today. The notes to a fairly recent anthology list my *Breaking the Silences* (1982) and add that it "leaves out male poets." All-male anthologies never elicit such a qualifier.

In this selection, twenty-five of the fifty-six poets are female (45 percent). Other identities are also amply represented: Afro-Cuban poets, LGBTQ authors, consecrated as well as emerging voices, those from different parts of the country or living in the diaspora. Here you will read work by a woman

1. *El Corno Emplumado / The Plumed Horn*, no. 23 (July 1967).

2. Margaret Randall, ed. and trans., *Estos cantos habitados / These Living Songs: Fifteen New Cuban Poets* (Fort Collins: Colorado State Review Press, 1978).

3. Margaret Randall, ed., *Breaking the Silences: 20th Century Poetry by Cuban Women* (Vancouver, BC: Pulp Press, 1982).

who was a domestic servant before the Revolution, by Communists and anti-Communists, by those of devout religious faith and atheists, by men and women of provincial backgrounds and those who were city-bred. Some were self-taught, while others enjoyed the best formal educations. Because the poems were written over eight decades, they also differ greatly stylistically, reflecting forms popular at the time as well as their authors' singular voices.

These poets are from the dozen or so important moments or groups that have nurtured recent literary history on the island: *Orígenes*;⁴ what some have called the Generation of Transition; the ill-fated El Puente; poets born in the 1950s and thus directly into a society in revolution, often referred to as the Generation of the Revolution; the first and second *Caimán Barbudo* groups; those who waited out the Quinquenio Gris (Five Gray Years);⁵ those who because of the ravages of those years sought solace outside the country; and those who have been nurtured by Vigía⁶ and other courageous and magical spaces where diversity has always been welcome.

Cuba has long been fertile ground for poetry, linked by its deep connections with Africa, Spain, Latin America, and the Caribbean; more recently with Latin America's modernism and conversational poetry; and also to several cultural manifestations from the United States, such as Walt Whitman, William Carlos Williams and the American idiom, jazz, the Harlem Renaissance, the Beats, and a poetry of protest.

And women have long been central. In the eighteenth century, Justiz de Santa Ana was a member of the Spanish overseas aristocracy who, nonetheless, used her privilege to conduct marriages for slaves and otherwise show her concern for those in the colony. When Cuban forces surrendered to the British in 1762, her long poem *Dolorosa métrica espreción del sitio y entrega de la Havana* originated as a protest document sent by Havana's women to Charles III of Spain. Almost one hundred years later, Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda, who was born in Camagüey in 1814, was a brilliant poet whose literary place among men was never questioned. Her poetry continues to be anthologized and studied far beyond Cuba's borders.

By the mid-nineteenth century, José Martí—hero and example to revolutionaries and dissidents alike—was writing important poetry in the modernist tradition. And throughout the first half of the twentieth century, despite the

4. *Orígenes* (1944–56) was an important Cuban literary group and magazine.

5. Quinquenio Gris is roughly between the end of the 1960s and 1975, when those deemed “different” suffered repressive measures that went from the loss of a job to relegation to a work camp. This is explained in more detail later.

6. Vigía is a publishing venture that began in Matanzas in 1985.

fact that Cuba was a small island with a population of only around eight million, poets such as Julián del Casal, Luisa Pérez de Zambrana, Rubén Martínez Villena, José Zacarías Tallet, Nicolás Guillén, Dulce María Loynaz, and José Lezama Lima were being read throughout the Spanish-speaking world.

Before the 1959 Revolution, poetry in Cuba was elitist, mostly interested the educated classes, and was published in very limited editions. One exception, among farmers and working people, was the *décima*, a ten-line stanza, generally consisting of forty-four lines (an introductory four-line stanza followed by four ten-line stanzas) recited or sung by *guajiros* (Cuban peasants), and occasionally written by those city poets who also favored the form. The *décima* bridged popular and more refined poetic expressions.

Because of the United States' disrespectful and entrenched reaction to the Revolution of 1959, and throughout the fifty-six years of blockade so far, the neighbors became antagonistic: David and Goliath. The United States repeatedly launched overt and covert attacks against the island, and Cuba resisted as it could. Dignity replaced commodities. For decades, Cuban poets, like other Cubans, were subjected to stereotypical images of life in the United States, which was either vilified as rife with addicts and criminals or romanticized as a land of plenty. They were able to visit the country to the north only by cutting themselves off from their homeland. On such a grossly unequal playing field, emigration was considered tantamount to betrayal.

From time to time, legitimate fear and overreactive frenzy prompted the revolutionary government to implement rigid restrictions, and for decades citizens who wished to travel or live elsewhere, even temporarily, were forced to choose exile. Waves of emigration, such as those of the early 1960s (those fearing a Socialist state), 1980 (Mariel), and 1994 (the rafters), marked rifts of differing sorts.⁷ At first those who left were called *gusanos* (worms), then exiles, and finally—after both sides made efforts to bridge the terrible gap—members of the diaspora.

Geographically, an island always means isolation. When a vastly unequal political struggle provokes a situation of rocky resistance, this isolation may

7. Following the 1959 Revolution, expropriations and anti-Communist hysteria provoked large numbers of Cubans to leave their country. The first wave consisted of those linked to Batista, then professionals lured by the U.S. brain drain. In 1962 more than 14,000 Cuban children were sent by their parents to the United States, many ending up in orphanages or foster care. From 1965 to 1973 the so-called Freedom Flights carried thousands north, and 125,000 left through the port of Mariel in 1980. In the mid-1990s more than 30,000 “rafters” departed. The United States has consistently given preference to Cubans arriving on our shores, a practice that has only begun to change since the reestablishment of relations in 2014.

become convoluted in unexpected ways. In addition to decades of U.S. aggression toward Cuba, the Revolution's stalled infrastructure (lack of Internet access, an antiquated mail system, scarcity of material goods) limited connection. As an important counterbalance, from its inception the Revolution valued, prioritized, and supported the arts.

The 1961 literacy campaign gave all Cubans the breakthrough magic of reading.⁸ Immediately a great number of books were subsidized by the government. World classics were appropriated and reproduced, and Cuban authors published in large editions.⁹ Along with all the other artistic genres, poetry was emphasized: writing it, reading it, listening to it. Cuban institutions sponsored workshops and recitals at schools and factories, in cultural centers, and on state farms. Living in Cuba from mid-1969 to the end of 1980, I participated in many of these activities. For a few months I even taught a poetry workshop one night a week at El Combinado del Este, a large prison to the east of Havana.

Centralization is a hallmark of Marxist-Leninist restructuring. In the Cuban cultural arena this meant creating a number of institutions aimed at bringing writers together, organizing their professional lives, promoting their publication, and supplying them with the paper and typewriter ribbons that began to disappear from the market as scarcity took hold. The Hermanos Saíz Association (HSA), named after two young brothers with poetic aspirations who had died in the revolutionary war, is the organization for young writers; it has chapters in every province.¹⁰ The Union of Writers and Artists (UNEAC) is home to the professionals; membership carries a monthly stipend. In other words, writers are paid for being writers.

Magazines and cultural supplements sprang up. Most prominent were

8. The campaign ran from January 1 to December 22, 1961. Thousands of literacy brigadistas traveled to remote areas where the lack of education was most entrenched. They reduced Cuba's illiteracy rate from between 24 and 40 percent to 4 percent, the latter figure mostly made up of those too old or too mentally challenged to learn. Important follow-up programs continued to deepen the effort.

9. Because of the blockade, the Revolution ignored international copyright until 1975, when it subscribed to it once more.

10. The Hermanos Saíz Association (HSA) was founded in October 1986 at a national meeting of young writers, artists, and cultural workers. It brought together in a single organization the Hermanos Saíz brigades of young writers, members of the New Song Movement, and the Raúl Gómez García brigade of cultural promoters. The HSA operates throughout Cuba, stimulating and promoting young writers and artists by offering scholarships and prizes and by staging public events. It also manages five publishing houses and a number of print and digital magazines. Writers and artists under the age of thirty-five may join.

Lunes de Revolución, *Casa de las Américas*, *Revista Unión*, *La Gaceta de Cuba*, *Signos*, *Revolución y Cultura*, *Santiago*, *El Caimán Barbudo*,¹¹ and *Pensamiento Crítico* (this last was more a journal of ideas than one of literary creativity). They published well-known and emerging voices, as well as essays and criticism. Intellectual exchange and living literature became the stuff of every day.

Depending on the individual, this official support might be experienced as welcome or intrusive. On the one hand, it was notable that a small country struggling to survive politically and economically would assign such importance to creativity and honor poets so profoundly. On the other, through such institutions the Revolution was able to keep close tabs on its artists and writers. Promotion, publication, and other support depended on how an author was seen by those who held positions of power at any given time. Early on, there was a great sense of freedom. But from the end of the 1960s through the mid-1970s, troglodyte minds gained control of the main cultural institutions, and repression and censorship set in. Difference became suspect, criticism of the revolutionary process was discouraged, and Soviet-style socialist realism threatened to birth its tropical counterpart.

Ironically, this repression was possible precisely because of the social importance poets commanded. We don't experience this in the same way in the United States because here poets are not often considered as having social or economic worth. But artistic repression happens here as well. There was a period in which the National Endowment for the Arts excluded LGBTQ artists from its grants. From the 1960s through the 1980s, a number of U.S. cultural magazines were forced to cease publication when their editors were harassed and offices ransacked by the FBI. And some of us can remember the McCarthy era, when creative people suspected of left affiliations were hunted down, brought before a congressional committee, asked to implicate colleagues and friends, fired from their jobs, and sometimes imprisoned. This latter period lasted about as long as the repressive period within the Cuban Revolution and was just as deplorable. The United States was a democracy silencing its own. Cuba was a socialist state doing the same.

With the inauguration of Cuba's Ministry of Culture in 1975, such decidedly nonrevolutionary controls began to be loosened, even reversed. It was

11. *El Caimán Barbudo* appeared in 1966 as a cultural supplement to the Young Communists' newspaper *Juventud Rebelde*. It was the Revolution's first mass publication for young Cuban poets. Jesús Díaz was its first editor, and Luis Rogelio Noguera, Víctor Casaus, Guillermo Rodríguez Rivera, and Raúl Rivero, among others, were on the staff. A monthly, it published eighty thousand copies. A second era would follow, and the publication has been marked by several twists and turns in modern Cuban literary history.

not until the early 1980s, though, that artists and writers began to breathe more easily. Since then, although with ups and downs, Cuban poets have written and published in an atmosphere of redemption, openness, and possibility.

A pivotal moment—endlessly discussed and used as the basis for arguments meant to prove or disprove freedom of expression within the Revolution—was Fidel Castro’s “Palabras a los intelectuales” (Words to the intellectuals). The Cuban leader uttered those words before a gathering of writers and artists at the National Library in June 1961. A film about Havana’s small cabarets had been removed from theaters, and the act of censorship had alarmed the creative community.

The Revolution was barely two and a half years old at the time. The first nationalizations had just taken place. The U.S.-backed military attack at the Bay of Pigs had been defeated two months prior, but pockets of counter-revolution continued to operate in the Escambray Mountains. The great literacy campaign was in full swing, and issues related to information, education, and creativity were being debated. These issues are never negotiated in a vacuum; they are shaped by the political system and the needs and goals of the citizenry involved. Questions were in the air, and Fidel—as was his custom for many years—responded to those questions by inviting interested writers and artists to gather and listen, but also to express what was on their minds.

“Words to the Intellectuals” was not a formal speech, elaborated following study and consensus. It was an on-the-spot response to a series of uncertainties, made by a man known for his brilliance and passion. The line from that speech that has most often been quoted is “Dentro de la Revolución, todo; contra la Revolución ningún derecho” (Within the Revolution every right; outside the Revolution none). Those who have most blatantly misinterpreted these words have interpreted “within” and “outside” as “with” and “against.” Moving forward, narrow-minded bureaucrats used that same interpretation to impose their own prejudices on Cuba’s cultural milieu. The fallout was tragic. Today that period is known as the *Quinquenio Gris*, a time span that in fact vastly exceeded five years and was much darker than gray. Some Cuban poets refer to it as “the ten black years,” others as “the time of the jackals.”¹²

The brilliance of Cuban poets and writers themselves, opposing the at-

12. Although the *Quinquenio Gris* is most often referred to as having lasted for five to ten years, it began to loom as early as the end of 1968 and was not completely eradicated until 1983, thus closer to a decade and a half.

tempts to mold them to a tired and constraining image, played no small part in maintaining an unbroken history of resistance. In retrospect we can see this resistance in the work of some of the poets who emigrated, as well as in the work of those who stayed. And a few courageous critical thinkers—Cintio Vitier, Fina García Marruz, Alfredo Guevara, Roberto Fernández Retamar, Graciela Pogolotti, Ambrosio Fornet, Julio García Espinosa, Arturo Arango, Desiderio Navarro, Reina María Rodríguez—kept a healthy take on creativity alive. For those able to see it, in the broader cultural context this wisdom had been there all along.¹³

Those responsible for the years of repression were relieved of their positions. Armando Hart took the reins of a newly established Ministry of Culture that began, in no uncertain terms, to create an atmosphere of respect and trust. In 1996, Hart remembered that the work he undertook twenty years earlier had its roots in the principles Fidel had put forth in “Words to the Intellectuals.” Applying those principles made for a balance, he said: within the Revolution every right; outside the Revolution none. In other words, in Cuba one could dissent from the party line. What one could not do was conspire to destroy the Revolution. For the Revolution had rights as well, the right to protect itself being the most important of these.

In January 2007, Cuban TV broadcast an interview with the man, long relegated out of sight and mind, who had been the public face of that terrible time.¹⁴ A shock wave spread through the country’s cultural world. Fearing a possible return to such ugly policies, poets began getting together, questioning the thinking behind the interview, and writing opinion pieces. Several paid a visit to the minister of culture, then Abel Prieto, demanding to know what was going on. Their collective concern resulted in a public discussion lasting many months, in which important poets, writers, critics, musicians, architects, museum directors, and others explored what they believed had happened twenty years earlier, how it had been allowed to happen, and how to make sure it couldn’t happen again. Some who had suffered in silence finally had the courage to bear witness to the repression they had endured.

13. In his “Socialism and Man in Cuba,” written in 1965, Ernesto Che Guevara argued, for example, that abstract art was more revolutionary than the stale figurative repetitions extolled in the Soviet Union. The more purely social themes in this important text were publicly discussed for years before much attention was paid to this revealing statement about artistic expression.

14. Luis Pavón. It seems the interview was simply the product of a TV producer with a short memory.

Others spoke for friends who had emigrated, died, or committed suicide. Messages came from outside the country as well, deepening a necessary exchange. This was a very healthy series of events, the repercussions of which can still be felt and appreciated in Cuba's cultural milieu.¹⁵

Another, very different, moment of reference was the Padilla affair. Heberto Padilla, included in this anthology, was a poet who started his career supporting the social change wrought by the Revolution, but he later became disenchanted. His book *Fuera del juego* (Outside the game) was a collection of critical poems, many exuding bitterness clothed in irony. When he entered it in the UNEAC literary contest in 1968, all five judges unanimously agreed it merited first place. The book was published, as was Antón Arrufat's winning manuscript in the theatrical category, the contents of which were also felt to be "problematic." When they appeared, however, both books included notes expressing institutional disagreement with the majority judgments.

Padilla went along for several years, working, writing, and continuing to live in Cuba. Then, in 1971 he was arrested by State Security and held for thirty-seven days. He was accused of engaging in counterrevolutionary activity: lying about the Revolution to foreign journalists and generally maintaining a negative attitude. When he was released, he claimed to be a changed man. He delivered a mea culpa at the UNEAC, before an audience composed mostly of other writers, in which he stated that he had seen the error of his ways. He disassociated himself from his previous behavior. His declaration included a pedantic and condescending warning to some of his contemporaries who might be inclined to fall into similar attitudes.

I remember that few of us in Cuba at the time knew what to make of this spectacle, but our support for the Revolution led us to accept the official line. Privately, we felt uncomfortable. Outside the country the incident marked a turning point for a number of internationally known writers. Some broke with Cuba. Others decided the event could not be taken out of a context they might not fully understand and, while expressing dismay that a writer could be arrested for expressing dissenting opinions, maintained their revolutionary allegiance.

Forty years after the event, Jorge Fornet offers the best analysis I've seen of this disturbing moment. In *El 71: Anatomía de una crisis*, he traces the ideolog-

15. For an in-depth exploration of both the repressive period and its later elucidation, see Margaret Randall, "El Quinquenio Gris," in *To Change the World: My Years in Cuba* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2009), 171–90.

ical push and pull that led up to it and made it possible—in a global as well as a national context.¹⁶ After tracing the history of the poet's detention, release, and self-incriminating confession, he quotes Uruguayan intellectuals Angel Rama (“[Padilla's words sounded] fraudulent because they were anachronistic. . . . Such self-criticisms were popular in the 1930s”) and Eduardo Galeano (“I have the impression, indeed the conviction, that [the speech] was deliberately conceived by Padilla in order to fuck Cuba”).¹⁷ For Mexico's Carlos Monsiváis and Spain's Juan Goytisolo, it was obvious that Padilla had engaged in an elaborate parody, one that would satisfy those persecuting him but be absolutely clear to his friends. Years later, Padilla himself would confirm this.

In his intervention at UNEAC, the poet used language, grammar, and spelling no one who knew him would believe was his, in order to point to a Stalinization of the Cuban process. He exaggerated his jailors' benevolence and his own and others' “crimes,” and he said that during his time at State Security he had even written “a poem to spring.” Fornet points out that in Cuba spring is irrelevant, not simply poetically but also climatologically, since the season isn't marked by any noticeable weather change. For right-wing intellectuals, such as Peru's Mario Vargas Llosa, the Padilla affair marked their break with the Revolution, while many intellectuals on the left simply accepted Cuba's official story, incapable of speaking out against it even when it silenced a poet for expressing dissenting opinions.

Almost a decade would pass before Padilla was allowed to leave Cuba. He went to the United States, where he continued to write, and taught at several universities. For a while he was the Revolution's *enfant terrible*. His moment of glory or shame, depending on how one saw it, overshadowed his poetry. He died in exile in 1990. I believe the Cuban Revolution made a mistake in its treatment of Padilla. By singling him out for repressive treatment, it needlessly turned a poet who disagreed with party positions into a martyr of the counterrevolutionary cause. And Padilla was not the last poet who would be singled out for “counterrevolutionary activities” and imprisoned for a suspect involvement with forces in the United States ever ready to co-opt Cuban intellectuals. In March 2003, poet and journalist Raúl Rivero was tried and sentenced to twenty years for “acts against the State.” He was freed in November of the following year and emigrated to Spain. As long as Cuba remains besieged politically and economically, and as long as some in power believe that attempting to silence a poet is preferable to allowing a diversity

16. Jorge Fornet, *El 71: Anatomía de una crisis* (Havana: Letras Cubanas, 2013), 147–65.

17. Fornet, *El 71*.

of opinion, such travesties may continue to occur but are increasingly more difficult to try to justify.

In 2014, I asked poet and essayist Roberto Fernández Retamar what he thought about the Padilla affair. He said that Padilla had been his friend, and had it not been for the fact that he worked at Casa de las Américas with Haydée Santamaría, he and others he knew might have ended up like the disgraced poet. Haydée protected those she respected and knew had talent, people she saw as being sincere revolutionaries irrespective of any doubts and questions they had. She wasn't the only one. The wisdom, vision, and prestige of such people were crucial to the Cuban Revolution continuing to stand for freedom even when some of its midlevel bureaucrats used their quotas of power to persecute others.

Antón Arrufat is also included here. His prizewinning book *Los siete contra Tebas* suffered the same fate as Padilla's, but he chose a different response. Relegated to the stacks of a branch library and unable to publish for fourteen years, he nevertheless remained in Cuba, bearing up under the repressive measures and silences endemic to the era. When his country emerged from its dark period, he began occupying the positions and receiving the honors he deserved. Recently he offered a long, beautifully expressed and detailed account of the Cuban Revolution's history of artistic restriction and freedom in an interview published in the *White Review*: "I think Cuban society is moving away from . . . Slavic socialism. . . . What is certain is that the human subject has not managed to create and bring about a perfect social system in which you can live in justice and equity. Perhaps we'll never manage it; maybe we'll find it tomorrow." And he adds: "Right now, literature, painting, theater, photography and Cuban art in general express, reflect and expose ideas freely. I think that our society has become, or is becoming, more intelligent in accepting differences and understanding that others are not how we would like them to be, and that if you want to live in a society that's worth anything, you have to admit that everyone is not like you."¹⁸

I have written at length about Fidel Castro's "Words to the Intellectuals" and the two chapters of the "Padilla affair" because both were moments that have been singled out by critics in this country eager to reduce the Revolution's cultural policies to a few sound bites taken out of a much more complex context. An in-depth study of more than half a century in which Cuban revolutionaries have been concerned with changing a people's relationship to the production, spiritual power, and appreciation of art in multiple genres

18. Interview by J. S. Tennant, *White Review*, February 2014.

reveals a picture with many important moments, conflicts, influences, and players.

Neoliberalism, mostly orchestrated and funded by the United States, established teaching positions, grants, and publications expressly designed to lure Cuban talent; the “brain drain” targeted artists and writers just as it did doctors, scientists, and sports stars, and the Revolution had to be constantly vigilant. Occasionally this vigilance got out of hand. In a country where, for the first time, the common good was being prioritized, that good was too often posited as contrary to individual agency. There were internal struggles between those who came from the old prerevolutionary Partido Socialista Popular (Moscow-oriented Communist Party) and the new style of revolutionary not burdened by its dogma, with Cuba’s increased dependence on the Soviet Union sometimes complicating the picture. There were movements and countermovements, conferences and congresses, many of which were hijacked by prejudice or unduly shaped by short-term goals.

It did not help that few of the men and women who led the insurrectional phase of struggle had given much thought to art, except to insist that everyone should have access to it. But what kind of art, and what place should it occupy in society? What parameters, if any, should contain it? What responsibilities did the Revolution have to artists, and what responsibilities did artists have to the Revolution? What about form and content?

The revolutionary leadership tended to place its confidence in those men and women who had proved themselves on the front lines, and few artists or writers had participated beyond occasional support work. Class was also an issue, with most of the successful creative minds coming from the bourgeoisie or petite bourgeoisie. Brilliance and ignorance, good intentions and the overreach inherent in vying for positions of power all played their parts when it came to establishing cultural policy.

Antonio Gramsci wisely wrote: “When a politician puts pressure on the art of his time to express a particular cultural world, his activity is one of politics, not of artistic criticism. If the cultural world for which one is fighting is a living and necessary fact, its expansiveness will be irresistible and it will find its artists.”¹⁹

To its immense credit, and as it attended to issues of economic growth and citizen well-being, while forced to defend a project always under assault, we can see that except during discrete crises the Cuban Revolution fought for a cultural and artistic expression that would be broadly accessible while retain-

19. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from Cultural Writings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 109.

ing a multifaceted individuality and healthy experimentation. Cuba found its artists and writers; they had been there all along.

Throughout the past half century, numerous poets—many of them represented here—brilliantly and passionately defended freedom, diversity of expression, healthy exchange, and work that has contributed to literature internationally. Virgilio Piñera, Roberto Fernández Retamar, Antón Arrufat, Lourdes Casal, Mirta Yáñez, Reina María Rodríguez, Alfredo Zaldívar, Víctor Rodríguez Núñez, and Laura Ruiz Montes are just some of the poets who have written or spoken eloquently about these issues. Critics and cultural workers Raquel Revuelta, Ambrosio and Jorge Fornet, Arturo Arango, Desiderio Navarro, and Zaida Capote have contributed important arguments. And leaders such as Che Guevara, Raul Roa, Armando Hart, Alfredo Guevara, Haydée Santamaría, Abel Prieto, and Fidel Castro himself have provided intellectual frameworks and demonstrated, through the ways in which they saw the emancipatory power of creativity, that a true revolution needs truly revolutionary art.²⁰

Anyone who has followed Cuban poetry—and the nation’s artistic expression in general—over the past several decades will attest to today’s broad diversity of opinions, stylistic tendencies, imagery, and multifaceted opposition to any rigid imposition. When I have thought about Cuban poets over the past half century writing to, with, out of, or against the Revolution, Víctor Rodríguez Núñez’s comment about what he has termed *teque* (formulaic speech) comes to mind: “[The new poets] continue to be dissidents—particularly with regard to dehumanization, no matter where it comes from. Still, none of them proposes a return to capitalism in our country, or celebrates private property, a market economy or free enterprise.”²¹

Sadly, along the way, groups that attempted to challenge the orthodoxy before the time was right paid with an inability to publish or with simply being told they must cease to operate. Nevertheless, some state institutions such as Casa de las Américas and the Cuban Institute of Film and Film Arts (ICAIC) were always beachheads of experimentation and intellectual and expressive freedom. These were places where difference was honored, and homosexuals or others considered “deviant” by the truly deviant minds continued to create through the worst of the repression.

20. For a detailed and well-documented analysis of Cuban cultural history from 1959 to 1974, see Rebecca Gordon-Nesbit, *To Defend the Revolution Is to Defend Culture: The Cultural Policy of the Cuban Revolution* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2015).

21. From the introduction to Víctor Rodríguez Núñez, *El pasado del cielo: La nueva y nuevísima poesía cubana*, quoted in Arturo Arango, *En los márgenes, acercamientos a la poesía cubana* (Matanzas, Cuba: Ediciones Matanzas, 2014), 29.

Ediciones Vigía, a publishing collective that opened its doors in Matanzas City in 1985, is mentioned in a number of this anthology's biographical notes. That collective was created by artists and writers strong enough in their own identities and allegiance to their Revolution to be able to confront an ignorant bureaucracy head-on. Established under the auspices of the provincial Book Center, an entity that itself operated under the umbrella of the Cuban Book Institute, it nevertheless assumed its right to publish Cuban writers and poets who had been repressed, forced into exile, or otherwise marginalized. And it published them with that special care and creativity that honors the poetic voice. Perhaps the bureaucracy left Vigía alone because the project produced only two hundred copies of each title. Perhaps, as is often true here in the United States, the government considered its influence meager. Or perhaps the terrible lessons of the previous decade had finally been learned.

Whatever the case, those trying to restrict publication of books by authors deemed "deviant" or "different" allowed the project to continue. I would argue that when people are sure of what they are doing, they are invincible. Vigía's books are entirely fabricated of throwaway materials as a way of identifying with the scarcity ordinary Cubans face. The limited editions have become collector's items. The Revolution eventually sat up and took notice. Soon it was actively supporting the endeavor. Today poets around the world dream of having a book published by Vigía, and Vigía books are in collections such as that of New York's Museum of Modern Art. Books by formerly marginalized writers also appear now from all the major Cuban publishers.

When I lived in Cuba, I noticed that censorship seemed to surge or recede depending on how seriously the Revolution felt besieged at a particular moment. When attacks proliferated or threats were imminent, the political apparatus seized up. Unity at all costs was the mantra. In less tumultuous times, controls were relaxed and the freedom of expression that was one of the Revolution's stated goals was more readily accessible. One of the results of this on-again, off-again practice, of course, has been an endemic self-censorship: the most dangerous and hardest to eradicate. But it too is fading.

Throughout most of the world today, the class conflicts that stratify societies are as palpable in the art world as they are in any other arena. There is the group of people who create, who produce the cultural products consumed by others, and another group made up of those who administer and profit from their work: publishers, museum directors, gallery owners, agents, and public relations specialists. The artists make art, and the administrators market it, determining tastes, setting trends, and sometimes reaping fortunes. In Cuba a series of socialist safeguards are in place that protect artists and minimize

the possibility for this sort of exploitation. Institutions work for writers and artists rather than prey on their creativity. This may change, of course, as the country adopts features of a market economy. But one thing that keeps Cuban administration of art and literature honest is that the administrators are likely to be artists themselves. The Revolution has encouraged creative minds to work in fields akin to their passions and wherever possible has made that happen.

After almost sixty years, I believe there is a level of openness and sophistication in Cuba that predicts a healthy future. Poets and writers once considered “ideologically suspect” have long appeared in the country’s journals. Their books are now published freely. Honors are bestowed exempt from extraliterary considerations and prejudices. Even during the early 1990s, when the implosion of the socialist bloc created the severe economic crisis known as The Special Period in a Time of Peace, artistic production suffered no more than other areas of the economy. Of those difficult years, critic Ambrosio Fornet has written: “Two things were *never* in short supply here, not even in the worst moments of the crisis: imagination and ideas. Lack of money and material resources only affected cultural production in quantitative terms—fewer books, expositions, concerts, films—but intellectual curiosity and constant reinvention were ongoing, and in fact became more intense in certain genres despite the exodus of numerous writers and artists.”²² Interestingly, when one looks at the exodus, a markedly lower percentage of writers and poets left the country than those working in other artistic mediums.

Since December 17, 2014, when President Barack Obama and President Raul Castro simultaneously announced the reestablishment of diplomatic relations between their two countries, Cuba has cautiously continued moving forward with changes begun long before. It will take a while for the U.S. Congress to lift the trade embargo and other impediments to normal relations. Although the initiative on the part of the United States seems more a change in method than in policy, in Cuba there is expectation and in the United States eagerness: a desire on the part of this country’s business community to participate in Cuban enterprises and on the part of ordinary citizens to visit a country that has long been so close yet seemed so far away. If nothing else, there will have to be a new accommodation between two peoples who share a complex history and whose love for each other is palpable.

Cuban poets have their narrative of loss. Many, like other Cubans, have

22. Ambrosio Fornet, “El enigma cubano,” in *Narrar la nación* (Havana: Instituto Cubano del Libro, 2009), 375 (my translation; emphasis added).

suffered dramatic family separations. Over the past two decades, some who have remained on the island have been able to attend poetry festivals and conferences in other countries, including the United States, and even work outside Cuba for periods of time. But others have never been able to participate in such travel. Then there is the changing relationship between the poets who left and those who stayed. During the Revolution's early years, those who left were considered enemies of the state. Contact was sporadic, if it existed at all. Sometimes, at some international venue, a poet living in Cuba would run into one who had chosen exile. The emotional need to connect was almost always stronger than the absurdity of fabricated disdain.

Through efforts on both sides, poets in- and outside the country gradually came together. Lourdes Casal, included in this anthology, was one of the prime movers of that complex process. Still, the scars from this history of fragmentation remain. One can read them in a number of the poems included here. Today there is ongoing exchange in correspondence, shared work, visits, publication in journals and anthologies, and discussions about what it means to be Cuban. *Cubanía*, a traditional concept of nationality, was once considered a positive attribute but has long since been relegated to an essence as superficial as today's false patriotism. Yet there is a shared Cuban-ness about which literary critics write, and Cuban poets on both sides of the divide explore it in their work.

The authentic Cuban psyche has to do with a history of Spanish and African heritages tinged with a remote memory of Taino-Arawak people. It has to do with inhabiting an island, where everything from tropical climate to insular experience defines a multifaceted identity. There are Cubans who consider themselves as belonging to an African nation, yet skin tones range from black to brown (mulatto) to white and, despite the Revolution's efforts to eradicate racism, race has always mixed with class in determining social status. There are the African religions and drumbeats, and a way of speaking Spanish that swallows word endings and produces inflections heard nowhere else, not even in nearby Puerto Rico. Years of resistance have sharpened a uniquely Cuban humor, often aimed at the person speaking, that also finds its way into the work.

And there have been monumental political struggles within relatively recent memory: against Spain, against England, and against the voracious domination of the United States. In the last century alone, there was the movement against Machado, and then Batista, and finally the sudden reality of a Revolution in which a group of young people, in a war that lasted two brief years, wrenched the country from the grasp of a local oligarchy supported by

the most powerful nation on earth.²³ That victory of 1959 produced a “before” and “after” unlike anything elsewhere or since. For Cuban poets born at the beginning of the twentieth century, such as Nicolás Guillén and Dulce María Loynaz, whose work opens this anthology, it meant an entirely different life. Guillén welcomed and embraced it. Loynaz viewed it as relegating her sensibility to the past and chose an inner exile of silence.

After January 1959, the poets of the important *Orígenes* group had to decide where they stood with regard to the new power structure. Although united in their opposition to Batista, they had marked political differences among themselves. Along with their antidictatorial stance, another characteristic that had brought them together was their Catholic faith, and the Revolution quickly declared itself atheist. Anticommunism was endemic, even among some who had participated in the struggle to overthrow the dictator. Ultimately, the members of *Orígenes* chose several different paths. Emilio Ballagas died before the Revolution took power. Gastón Baquero sought early exile. José Lezama Lima remained in Cuba yet suffered some degree of marginalization before he was honored as one of the country’s greatest writers. Samuel Feijóo launched a veritable movement of several artistic genres in his native Villa Clara. Cintio Vitier and Fina García Marruz saw no contradiction between their faith and the tenets of the Revolution; they set an example that would greatly inspire and enrich official tolerance.

The next generation of poets came to see itself as one of transition; only some of its members had taken an active role in the revolutionary process, but most welcomed the change. Roberto Fernández Retamar and Pablo Armando Fernández are of this generation. They now occupy important positions in the world of Cuban letters. Poets who are only half a generation younger, such as Mirta Yáñez, Miguel Barnet, and Nancy Morejón, have also stepped up to take their places as eminent figures. Then there is the generation of poets born in the mid-1950s or shortly thereafter. One of them told me once, “We don’t need to write about the Revolution; we *are* the Revolution,” by which I understood him to mean that he and his comrades weren’t compelled to write about literacy, collective farms, or other achievements. They felt the need to create a new language through which they would be able to express the dramatic changes taking place in their lives.

Within these broad generational successions there have been, of course,

23. Gerardo Machado y Morales was president of Cuba from 1925 to 1933. His dictatorial practices provoked protest and an armed opposition that failed. Fulgencio Batista y Zaldívar was the elected president of Cuba from 1940 to 1944, and dictator from 1952 to 1959, before being overthrown as a result of the Cuban Revolution.

also more discrete affinities: for example, poets grouped in a particular city or around a specific publication. El Puente was one such group. From 1961 to 1965, it published writers outside the mainstream. The project was sadly before its time and was forced to shut down, although it had introduced the work of such luminaries as Nancy Morejón, Miguel Barnet, and Georgina Herrera, as well as that of Ana María Simo, who ended up leaving the country.

Cuban poets who came to maturity during those early years also refer to the first and second *Caimán Barbudo* groups. In Matanzas, Vigía brought poets with similar sensibilities together. In other parts of the island, like circles formed. Sometimes shared yearnings predominated, sometimes subject matter or writing styles; sometimes those involved were creating a communal space that provided them refuge from official misunderstanding and marginalization.

Cuban poetry is rich in subject matter, tone, image, and stylistic innovation. Nicolás Guillén brought an Afro-Cuban essence into poems that still enable us to hear the drumbeat of cultures unbroken by the Middle Passage. His poetry helped put the *negrista* movement on the map. Nancy Morejón, Excilia Saldaña, Georgina Herrera, and Caridad Atencio situate an authentic women's experience within that narrative. José Lezama Lima remains the great father of the neo-baroque. I cannot think of another poem that captures the intimate details of everyday life radically changed by the Revolution better than Eliseo Diego's "El sitio en que tan bien se está." Gastón Baquero, Antón Arrufat, and Alfredo Zaldívar exude a homoeroticism that excites any reader's blood, irrespective of his or her paradigm of desire, while Laura Ruiz Montes and Anisley Negrín Ruiz evoke its lesbian counterpart. Dulce María Loynaz and Carilda Oliver Labra write with unsurpassed passion about different aspects of the human condition. Fina García Marruz's poetry issues from a unique and exquisite sensibility.

Few have written out of a place of despair as palpably as Raul Hernández Novás, Ángel Escobar, Alberto Rodríguez Tosca, Soleida Ríos, Basilia Papastamatíu, Ramón Fernández-Larrea, or Reina María Rodríguez, or with the fine-tuned intelligence of Roberto Fernández Retamar, Luis Rogelio Noguerras, Alex Fleites, Víctor Rodríguez Núñez, Lourdes Casal, Norberto Codina, and Caridad Atencio. Georgina Herrera's poems come from a profound working-class consciousness. Mirta Aguirre, Georgina Herrera, and Marilyn Bobes speak in different ways to women's struggle in society. Felix Pita Rodríguez, Pablo Armando Fernández, and Laura Ruiz Montes, each from his or her generational sensibility, sing to a Revolution that has shaped their lives, while Heberto Padilla leaves bitter testimony of his rejection of

that social experiment. Lourdes Casal, Magali Alabau, and others describe the pain of exile. Each of these fifty-six poets has something to tell us, and a powerful voice with which to do so.

What distinguishes Cuban poetry from the mid-twentieth century on is its embrace of dialogic tendencies: it is active, participatory, conversational, engaged. This has been true of Latin American poetry in general. Perhaps in Cuba, because of such profound social change (and independent of where the poet stands with regard to that change), this has been more noticeable. There is a rejection of solipsism and an understanding that mind and body, politics and humanity, history and memory are of a piece.

Because it has so often been reported out of context and incompletely, I have gone into some detail regarding the dogmatism and excesses suffered by Cuban poets at different times during the past half century. It is more difficult, perhaps, to fully express the extraordinary home that poetry has found within the Revolution. Being heard and honored as a creative being is a beautiful thing. Sadly, in the United States it is not common. During my years in Cuba I crisscrossed the island, reading my work and that of others, and listening to local poets who always had something to offer. I won't forget Angel Peña, a metallurgical worker in remote Granma Province, who astonished a group of us with his complex and moving poems. Living poetry in this way is an extraordinary experience, and one that nurtures one's own creativity. Those reading tours are among my fondest Cuban memories. Because of the Revolution, poetry has been able to break out of its ivory tower and converse with people who otherwise would never have had the opportunity.

In the period covered by this anthology, Cuban poetry has been vanguardist, neo-baroque, modernist, conversational, woven of myth and dream, erotic and homoerotic, spiritual or frankly religious, pastoral, direct as a machete blade against a stalk of burnt sugarcane, and—why not?—bringing to life the heroic gestures of men and women who changed history. It speaks of love, fear, madness, transformed human relationships, simple pleasures, loss, exile, separation from loved ones, distinctly Cuban ways of being, and all the profound philosophical questions, in forms that range from sonnet to villanelle and from *décima* to the more open style in which most modern verse is made. It can be biting, ironic, tender, and humorous, and it involves the complex codes that are embedded in the essence of the Cuban psyche.

The reader of this book will also be able to listen in on intimate subterranean conversations between poets. Virgilio Piñera tells José Lezama Lima that, in dying first, Lezama “closed his wound” and that his novel *Paradiso* assures him his place in posterity. Carilda Oliver Labra speaks to Rolando

Escardó in the dramatic moment of the latter's death, offering her experience of it in her moving poem to him. Wichy Nogueras addresses Víctor Casaus in the context of an imagined funeral that eerily foretells his own several years later. Pablo Armando Fernández converses with Roberto Fernández Retamar about how the Revolution changed the concept of liberty. Fina García Marruz and Retamar remember the complex textures of earlier times. Cintio Vitier speaks to his contemporaries about the new sources of experience the Revolution has opened up. Three poems, in very different ways, evoke Ernesto Che Guevara. Miguel Barnet tells Che that he is the true poet. Fina García Marruz speaks to Che from her deep sense of Christ's presence in her life. Reina María Rodríguez tells a secret father-and-son story through an eroding copy of Korda's famous photograph of the hero.

Milena Rodríguez Gutiérrez begins one of her poems with lines from one by Fina García Marruz, and both poems are included here. Lourdes Casal, Magali Alabau, and Damaris Calderón articulate the exile experience, while Antón Arrufat, Laura Ruiz Montes, and Caridad Atencio address the drama of separation from their vantage points on the island.

A number of the poets dedicate poems to one another: another clue to tracing friendships and influences. And certain figures, images, and ideas reoccur in Cuban poetry of the past half century. As a symbol of an island identity and physiognomy, the sea wall that runs the length of Havana and speaks of separation, migration, exile, and accommodation in other lands (or the poet's inability to accommodate) is among the most obvious. The actual or metaphorical road is another. In her hallucinatory prose poem "Embrace him . . . Embrace him . . .," Soleida Ríos mentions poets Omar Pérez López and Luis Lorente, both also included here. In other poems, both the biblical Lot and his wife appear: the former in one by José Pérez Olivares and the latter in one by Belkis Cuza Malé. Mirta Yáñez and Víctor Rodríguez Núñez write about Ho Chi Minh. Gastón Baquero and Alfredo Zaldívar reference Oscar Wilde.

What colors repeat themselves from poem to poem in those written by poets on a tropical island? One might think green. On this particular island, it may be the red of blood and struggle. The blue and gold of the sea are present in several poems. And violet is the hue I found most frequently: it moves between blood red and a metaphysical blue. As for the shapes that appear in these poems, there is always the enigmatic shape of an island, sometimes rising proudly out of the sea, sometimes vaguely metaphorical.

Author and astute cultural critic Arturo Arango writes: "What does and does not identify Cuban poetry? What is and isn't a poetry of the Revolu-

tion? Persistence signals a particular relationship between literature and power (specifically, although not exclusively, power in the cultural arena).”²⁴ He continues:

Beyond the tricks that time plays on us even now, beyond the appearances and disappearances we continue to observe (any of our living poets, or those we have yet to discover, may at this moment be writing lines that will assure their place in the canon), we know there is a core group consisting of authors whose work resists not only the passage of time but also the vicissitudes that politics imposes upon our literature. There isn’t an anthologizer who has dared exclude from his or her table of contents the names of Lezama or Guillén, Retamar or Kozer. Fortunately, twentieth-century Cuban poetry was, without question, one of the great creations of the language, and among its authors are those whose poetics themselves have generated whole new cosmologies, moments of extraordinary intensity in which language and history, the circumstantial and the transcendental, crystallized in a single cohesive relationship. . . .

And now, let time pass and negate all that I have just said.²⁵

Time *is* passing, as it always does. This anthology reflects but a moment in that time, opening a window on eight decades of Cuban poetry. Even as it appears, new generations are producing their signature voices.

Cubans continue to grapple with what is arguably one of the most important experiments in social change the modern world has seen. The country’s current challenge is to meet global market requirements without relinquishing the Revolution’s great achievements: universal education and health care, work for all its citizens, and a high level of cultural fulfillment. Cuban poets continue to record this history more accurately and compellingly than any social scientist.

24. Arturo Arango, “Primera coda: Las negociaciones, el siglo, el canon,” in *En los márgenes, acercamientos a la poesía cubana*, 49.

25. Arango, “Primera coda,” 53.

SOURCES

Nicolás Guillén's "Tengo" was first published in *Tengo* (Las Villas: Universidad Central de Las Villas, 1964), and later in *Obra poética, tomo II (1958–1985)* (Havana: Letras Cubanas, 2002). "Piedra de horno" is from *Poemas de amor* (Havana: Ediciones Unión, 1971), and later appeared in *Obra poética, tomo II*. "Madrigal" first appeared in *Sóngoro consongo* (Havana: Úcar, García y Cia., 1931), and later in *Obra poética tomo I (1922–1958)* (Havana: Letras Cubanas, 2002). Guillén wrote a number of poems titled "Madrigal." Cuba had no publishers, as such, in the early 1930s, and books were printed at commercial presses.

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14, no. 28 (January–June 1982): 148–49. “Sobre una piedra” first appeared in *Coloquio: El girasol sediento* (Las Villas, Cuba: Universidad Central de las Villas, 1945).

“Soneto para no morirme,” “Breve viaje nocturno,” “El hombre habla de sus vidas anteriores,” and “Oscar Wilde dicta en Montmartre a Toulouse-Lautrec la receta del cocktail bebido la noche antes en el salón de Sarah Bernhardt” by Gastón Baquero all appeared in *Poesía completa*, 2nd ed. (Madrid: Editorial Verbum, 2013).

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Reina María Rodríguez's "las islas," "las vigas," and "peligro" are from *En la arena de Padua* (Havana: Editorial Unión, 1992). "—al menos, así lo veía a contra luz—" is from *La foto del invernadero* (Bogotá: Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores de Colombia, 1998).

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"En las traviesas," "Rostros," and "Nación" by Israel Domínguez are from *Viaje de regreso* (Matanzas, Cuba: Ediciones Matanzas, 2012).

Luis Yuseff's "Todas las vidas del Ibis" is from *Yo me llamaba Antonio Broccardo* (Pinar del Río, Cuba: Ediciones Cauce, 2004). "Kodak Paper ITC 'Kodak Paper 1'" is from *Vals de los cuerpos cortados* (Holguín, Cuba: Ediciones Holguín, 2004). "Balada del pájaro que llora" is from *Salón de última espera* (Havana: Casa Editorial Abril, 2007).

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